

TURNABOUT/VOX HISTORICAL SERIES

CALLAS

Arias from
BELLINI, PONCHIELLI
VERDI and WAGNER

Radio Italiana Orchestra, Torino
Basile, Santini & Votto, Conductors

A FONIT/CETRA RECORDING



THS 65125

MARIA CALLAS *Sings Arias from Operas by* **Bellini, Wagner, Verdi & Ponchielli**

Radio Italiana Orchestra, Torino

GABRIELE SANTINI, ARTURO BASILE & ANTONINO VOTTO, Conductors

THS 65125



Callas at the beginning of her rise to stardom . . .

La Divina

Maria Callas was only fifty-three when she died in September 1977; she had given her last operatic performance, in the title role of Puccini's *Tosca*, eight years earlier. Although her career on the lyric stage spanned less than two full decades, it can be safely said that no other soprano—in fact, no other singer—generated such excitement, none other accomplished so much in the way of restoring neglected works or, more important, restoring the concept of living drama to the operatic stage.

"Drama comes first," Callas declared; "otherwise it's boring." The one thing she could never be was boring. She never spared herself, vocally or dramatically, and when the relentlessly pushed voice began to lose its bloom she was still mesmerizing in her presence, still electrifying in her gestures and the way she made the words live. "Generally," she told John Ardoin (the most distinguished of her biographers), "I upset people the first time they hear me, but I am usually able to convince them of what I am doing."

She was surpassingly convincing in the most dramatic roles—as Norma, as Medea, as *Tosca*—roles that called for power and a varied range of emotions. She was a star from first to last, and never sang anything but leading roles anywhere. She was born Maria Kalogeropoulos in New York on December 3, 1923. In 1936 the family returned to Greece and remained there till the end of World War II; it was there that she had most of her training, and at the Athens Opera that she gave her first performance, as Martha in Eugen d'Albert's *Tiefeland*. In 1945 she returned to New York, but not to stay; her career had its real beginning in a

Side 1—14:30 Min.

BELLINI: I PURITANI

"Ah, rendetemi la speme . . . Qui la voce sua soave
—Vien diletto è' in ciel la luna" (7:00)

WAGNER: TRISTAN & ISOLDE

"Death of Isolde" (Sung in Italian) (7:30)

Arturo Basile, *Conductor*

Side 2—17:30 Min.

VERDI: LA TRAVIATA

"E strano e strano — Ah forse è lui — Follie
follie — Sempre libera — Addio del passato" (12:55)

Gabriele Santini, *Conductor*

PONCHIELLI: LA GIOCONDA

"Suicidio" (4:35)

Antonino Votto, *Conductor*

performance of Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* in Verona in 1947.

She was singing Wagner as well as Italian opera at the beginning, and, as Desmond Shawe-Taylor observed at the time, a "versatility scarcely paralleled since the days of Lilli Lehmann was demonstrated when, within a week of singing Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*, she deputized for another singer in the intricately florid music of Elvira in Bellini's *Puritani*. Before long she began to relinquish the Wagnerian parts and Turandot in order to concentrate on the *bel canto* operas of Bellini, Rossini, Donizetti and Verdi." Her debut at La Scala was as *Aïda* in 1950; she first appeared at Covent Garden in 1952, made her American debut two years later in Chicago, and first sang at the Metropolitan Opera in 1956—as *Norma* on all three occasions.

By the time Callas first sang in America the first of the several recordings she made at La Scala for EMI were already in circulation here on the Angel label and had served to identify her unmistakably as the unique phenomenon she was. Fortunately, she continued to record into the 1960s, to leave a legacy of several complete operas and numerous collections of assorted arias. (In addition to the EMI recordings, there was a *Medea* for Ricordi, which circulated here briefly on Mercury.) Lesser known, but no less fascinating, are the recordings she made for Cetra about 1950 and 1951, just before the big breakthrough into international celebrity; several of the most memorable of these early recordings—which have acquired the status of sought-after collectors' items as they passed from one label to another or simply disappeared for long periods—are gathered here.

Except for the one Wagner item, all the material presented here is drawn from Calla's early recordings of complete operas. One of the first of these was that of Bellini's *I Puritani*, in which, as Alan Blyth recalled in *The Gramophone*, "We marvelled at the richness and variety of her expression and the pathos of her downward runs in the cabaletta, so well-suited to Elvira's madness. Here was this music, so long the province of small voices, sung once again by a dramatic soprano capable of agility. We were prepared to overlook the occasional inequalities in the vocalisation for such deep understanding of style and situation . . ."



. . . and on tour of the U.S. with Giuseppe Di Stefano in the 1970's.

Callas's extraordinary, broadly paced rendition of "Suicidio," from *La Gioconda*, was perhaps the single most stunning item among her early recordings, its impact summed up by Andrew Porter in a review of one of the numerous reissues nearly twenty years ago: "I listened to several versions in succession, and all others sounded tame after this one."

While Callas rerecorded both *I Puritani* and *La Gioconda* at La Scala (the Bellini opera in 1953 with Tullio Serafin conducting, the Ponchielli in 1960 under Antonino Votto, the same conductor who presided over her first version of that work), she never remade *La Traviata*. These excerpts from the early Cetra recording—Violetta's double-aria from Act I and the deathbed farewell—are therefore the more to be cherished as prime examples of this unique artist's combination of musical and dramatic capacities. (The offstage Alfredo at the beginning of this sequence is tenor Francesco Albanese.)

Neither *Tristan und Isolde* nor any other Wagner opera was recorded in full by Callas. The famous *Liebeshod*, here sung in Italian, affords an exciting glimpse of what might have been had she continued active in this part of the repertory. Andrew Porter cited this performance as "a beautiful example of sustained interpretation, with a long line running through the whole piece, each phrase finding part-film in the next until the climax is reached. . . ."

RICHARD FREED

A Fonit/Cetra Recording
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BELLINI
I PURITANI

"Ah, rendetemi la speme... Qui la
voce sua soave - Vien diletto è
in ciel la luna" (7:00)

THS 65125
(VS 5649)

Side 1
14:30 minutes

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VERDI
LA TRAVIATA

"E strano e strano - Ah forse è lui -
Follie follie - Sempre libera -
Addio del passato" (12:55)

THS 65125
(VS 5650)

Side 2
17:30 minutes

PONCHIELLI

LA GIOCONDA
"Suicidio" (4:35)

MARIA CALLAS, Soprano
Gabriele Santini &
Antonino Votto, Conductors
Radio Italiana Orchestra, Torino

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